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Striving for Balance: Learning about Effective Consolidation

In its Riḍván 2008 message, the Universal House of Justice confirmed that in the past year "the advance made in the process of entry by troops was significant indeed." The direct teaching activities that led to this surge in growth have been the focus of the past three issues of this newsletter. But as exciting as the wave of new enrollments has been, it is neither possible nor advisable to dwell too long on expansion without considering the requirements of consolidation; the two processes are, of course, inextricably related.

The House of Justice stated at Riḍván 2007 that "carrying forward the work of expansion and consolidation hand in hand" is "the key to sustained growth." What does that statement suggest in practical terms? Clearly "hand in hand" implies that both these vital areas of activity should be addressed from the outset of a teaching project, rather than considering consolidation only after the expansion phase has been carried out. It means beginning with a plan for a cycle of activity that takes into account the available human resources and identifies the friends ready "to carry out the acts of service that would sustain large-scale expansion and consolidation," which in some contexts might lead to an increase of 10 or 20 new believers and in another, an influx of 200.

"Hand in hand" also suggests that expansion and consolidation are mutually reinforcing: effective teaching contributes to the consolidation work and through consolidation activities, the teaching work is sustained. Understandably believers are elated when their teaching campaigns result in new declarants, but it is yet more gratifying when these new believers themselves become active teachers and servants of the Cause. As the Guardian explained in a letter written on his behalf:

> It is not sufficient that our numbers should increase; we want people whose faith stands on a rock and no trial can move. We want people who will in turn arise and carry the Message to other people and guide other souls.

At the heart of effective consolidation is the institute process. A significant number of the new declarants need to proceed through the sequence of courses so that enough believers are trained to carry out the acts of service that are associated with each course and are necessary for building a vibrant community life. Alongside the program of the training institute, learning is being gained about how devotional gatherings, home visits, and other approaches help confirm the faith of new believers so it "stands on a rock." Ultimately, this process depends on their connecting ever more deeply with Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation and, in doing so, apprehending God's purpose for humanity at this stage in history.

This issue of the newsletter explores the challenges faced and the successes achieved in the consolidation work in a number of clusters. The major themes include planning, follow-up, the institute process, and home visits for deepening.

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Planning Ahead: *To achieve a seamless relationship between expansion and consolidation, the friends are striving to draw up their plans for the expansion phase with careful consideration of the human resources ready to carry out consolidation activities. The learning from the examples below confirms that although each phase has its focus, the processes of expansion and consolidation* "*must proceed simultaneously.*"

Burkina Faso

The cluster agencies in **Zecco**, which are still in the early stages of learning what will be required to establish an intensive program of growth, carefully analyzed how many devotional gatherings, children's classes, and junior youth groups could be initiated with the human resources available before setting their teaching goals. The subsequent teaching campaign was not only successful in attracting many new souls to the Cause of God—the first day alone witnessed 25 declarations and the registration of 62 children—but also resulted in the establishment of enough core activities to ensure that growth was sustainable. Prior to the onset of the teaching campaign, the friends had prepared to immediately offer home visits to the new believers, and children's classes and junior youth groups for their youngsters were organized without delay. This advance planning, which included a refresher course on Ruhi Institute Book 3, ensured that by the end of the second day of the expansion phase four children's classes were opened for 30 children of the new believers.

Uzbekistan

After several cycles of growth, the friends in the **Tashkent** cluster learned to begin the consolidation work immediately by starting Book 1 with new believers and seekers during the expansion phase. The following account reflects not only the value of sound planning but a focus on effective teaching and systematic follow-up:

> The institute coordinator, with the assistance of the Auxiliary Board member, arranged for tutors to be available at the headquarters of the project for conducting Book 1 when needed. Usually an intensive Book 1 course was offered on the eighth, ninth, and tenth days of the expansion phase. In carrying out the practice components, the new participants would be accompanied by their tutors to conduct devotional meetings with their friends and family members, an activity which led to more enrollments.
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> It was interesting but not surprising to observe that the readiness of the new believers to join Ruhi courses and to actively engage in teaching was directly related to the quality of the teaching work. During the project, when the spiritual dynamics of the teaching work were in place, by carefully following the guidance provided in Book 6 and striving to bring coherence to our outer and inner conditions, we would witness not only an increase in enrollments but also an immediate success in efforts to consolidate the new believers. Book 1 would start on the spot and the new believers would lead us to other souls, and the tutors would feel more capable of accompanying others.
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> Of course, of central importance was the content of the Message which was conveyed. The friends would share "Anna's presentation" with a better understanding of the sequence of concepts, and the invitation to join the Bahá'í community and participate in building a new civilization would become an empowering message for the teacher and the seeker alike. The new declarant would see Book 1 as a natural outcome of such a commitment and would actively participate in order to explore the necessary conditions and learn the acts of service that would help to transform oneself and participate in

> transforming the society. The believers remarked: "How coherent is 'Anna's presentation' with Book 1 and with the other courses of the Ruhi Institute!" After this kind of teaching, study circles also were in a different mode. One of the tutors commented: "I have never had such a motivated group of youth." Another tutor mentioned: "It was very easy and natural to talk with the participants about teaching from the beginning. Every discussion was around teaching the Faith. We always consulted about how to do it in a better way. And participants were eager to complete all the books as soon as possible, develop their capacities for service, and fulfill their special mission in life. There were challenges when some participants would say that they felt inadequate to teach the Faith the way they were taught. We were reminded of the example in Book 6 that even little candles give light and warmth."
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> By the end of the cycle this group of seven youth had completed Book 4. They participated in the next teaching project and were among the most active and enthusiastic teaching teams.

Systematic Follow-up: *When following up with new believers or seekers after a teaching project, a warm, personalized approach is often the most effective in guiding these souls on their newfound spiritual journey and gradually leading them to study circles and other core activities.*

France

During the expansion phase, individual Bahá'ís are assigned to accompany each new believer, as well as those seekers who are close to the Faith. The "referent," as the role is termed in French, nurtures the new believer by interacting with them regularly, building bonds of friendship, facilitating home visits and other deepening activities, and engaging them in the institute process. This approach, which requires perseverance during the early stages of working with declarants and seekers, has resulted in 73 percent of the 104 newly enrolled believers from November 2007 to June 2008, participating in the institute courses. The personal experience of a new believer in the **Créteil** cluster attests to the effectiveness of the consolidation work:

> My first contact lasted more than three hours and until now has been the most important day of my life. During those three hours [of "Anna's presentation"], I understood concepts such as the eternal Covenant, a universal Cause, one common Faith, and the life and suffering of Bahá'u'lláh. Thanks to this I was able to turn my heart to the Sun of Truth and recognize His Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh. In this first session I also learned about a book that is the first in a sequence of courses of the institute. While studying Book 1, I was also invited to participate in a junior youth camp that was going on at the same time. It has become difficult for me to live as before. I have discovered that prayer is of primary importance because it nourishes one's soul and through this we demonstrate our station of servitude to God. I felt how much, by reciting the short obligatory prayer each day, I was attracting the blessings of God. Once I completed Book 1, I wanted to finish the other books and move as quickly as possible to Book 5 to be able to help the launching of a junior youth group, as I had seen and felt so much about the transformation these youth underwent. The Bahá'í community and believers in my cluster are united. Indeed, this community has welcomed me as one of them, as if we had known each other forever, which greatly furthered my desire to work in the Great Plan of God.

The believers in the cluster have also found that not only do those new to the Faith respond well to systematic consolidation, they appreciate having regular, set times for deepening visits and want them to occur more frequently—even daily. This yearning to learn among the

new believers demonstrates that love for the Faith and engagement in the process of the Five Year Plan can transcend the lack of time and other limitations that we sometimes assume exist.

Accompanying New Believers into the Institute Process: *Bringing new believers into the institute process obviously maximizes and systematizes the deepening and consolidation efforts of the friends in a cluster. This is achieved more easily when Bahá'í teachers help new believers and seekers understand that as Bahá'ís they are embarking on a path of spiritual transformation and a life of service.*

Canada

Direct teaching efforts in the **Toronto** cluster have resulted in marked success during the past several months, going from an average of 20 new declarants a year to 43 in less than nine months. While some of these have been the result of nurturing friends, family members, and co-workers, the majority (32) have been the result of direct, collective teaching initiatives in neighborhoods. The members of the teaching teams reside in three of the four neighborhoods. A report that analyzes their experience in expansion and consolidation highlights some important areas of learning:

> While an increasing number of friends have grown in confidence and ability to teach and to help a soul recognize Bahá'u'lláh, it has proven much harder to deepen and consolidate. We have recognized that the quality of the first teaching encounter and the approach to sharing the Message have an important impact on our ability to consolidate.
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> We observed that some who were newly enrolled would not attend core activities often, or at all, despite responding positively to invitations. When later asked why they did not attend, their reasons were generally not substantive. They were going out with friends or participating in the activities that they always had. The teachers recognized that the initial teaching encounter had not, in retrospect, sufficiently raised the consciousness of the new believer. In their teaching work the friends have now begun trying to perceive whether seekers recognize that they have received a profound truth, one that will impact their everyday life.
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> Beyond the initial teaching experience, the importance of not only inviting but assisting those who embrace the Cause to begin Book 1 became quite apparent and is now central to all teaching/consolidation initiatives. In reviewing the results of the teaching efforts over the past nine months, it is quite clear that on the whole those who entered Book 1 remained involved in the Faith, and many of these have arisen to serve. Those who did not enter Book 1, who often only received an introductory presentation, generally drifted away. In thinking about this further, one important element, addressed in the first unit of Book 1, is that the new believers develop the habit of reading the Writings regularly and with a certain degree of reflection and thoughtfulness, and conscious that they should seek to understand how the Word of God impacts and alters their everyday lives. Regardless of whether a new believer begins Book 1, attention to this spiritual element on the part of the teacher is important.

United States

A report from the **San Jose** cluster in California discusses a challenge faced by the Bahá'í teachers—the initial reluctance of some new believers to join institute courses or other activities. This problem was overcome when the Bahá'í teachers explained the underlying purpose of the courses as preparation for service to the community and to mankind.

A young man, 23 years old: We knocked on his front door. He opened it but did not seem overly excited about seeing us again. He had already received his first deepening theme and visibly was not enthusiastic about receiving his second. I thought to myself, deepening themes should not seem like a distasteful pill a new believer has to swallow after becoming a Bahá'í.

I told him that we needed youth like him to help the younger generation make good choices and contributions to bettering the world instead of involving themselves in drugs and/or gangs. He lit up and shared something personal. He said, "I used to be in a gang and stopped after watching two of my friends die from their involvement in that." After pausing a moment, he added in a serious tone, [referring to becoming a junior youth animator], "I really want to help with this." We scheduled a time to meet to discuss the training required for becoming a junior youth animator and to present the second deepening theme.

A young woman, 23 years old: We knocked on her door and she spoke to us through her open bedroom window. She had not yet received any of the deepening themes. This young woman is well known by the children in her apartment complex as being a type of "big sister." The first thing we told her was that a children's class was starting in her neighborhood on the coming Saturday. She immediately started summoning children from her bedroom window so we could tell them about the class. While we discussed the class with the children, the new believer seemed to smile with pride. She jumped into the conversation on a few occasions to encourage the children to attend. She also agreed to pass out flyers to her neighbors about the class. She had initially agreed to meet with us the next week to learn more about the Faith but later said, "I will see you guys on Saturday to help with the children's class." We also briefly discussed her becoming a junior youth animator. She lit up and said, "I used to work as a social worker and counselled young adults. I want to hear more about that."

The cluster agencies in the **Phoenix** cluster in Arizona sensed that some new believers were not comfortable with the idea of "taking a course." Through trial and error, approaches were devised that lessened the anxiety of the new friends about "studying" and to become more open to participating in the institute process.

Initially we simply would invite the new believers to join a study circle, but we learned that this approach needed some modification. Many of them had only a basic education and the idea of studying seemed intimidating to them. We learned that in order to generate interest we needed to first get to know them, and then while directing the conversation to spiritual subjects (a Book 2 skill), have a copy of the first couple of pages of Book 1, and ask, "Can we share this paragraph with you?" Through subsequent visits the new believers have transitioned naturally into a study circle. These study circles are small, with one new believer and family members and/or close friends.

Home Visits for Deepening: *One of the recognized methods for consolidation is visiting new believers and offering deepening lessons in their own homes. When enrollments are large, this approach requires a good number of committed friends to carry out home visits systematically and frequently. In addition to building bonds of love and fellowship, one aim is to attract a significant number of these new believers to institute courses.*

The accounts below from countries on three continents share the learning from the efforts of the friends to implement a program of home visits using the six themes from Book 2.

Malaysia

The Bahá'í community has produced five pamphlets, each of which reproduces one of the deepening themes presented in Book 2, including the related quotations from the Writings. Each is beautifully illustrated with images that help the teacher to explain the spiritual theme. The teachers often ask the new believer or seeker to read sections of the pamphlet aloud and then together they explore the meaning of the passage. Before these aids were available, teachers often forgot important elements of the themes during their presentations or could not present them in a logical and fluid manner. Other family members frequently join in during the presentation. The teacher leaves the pamphlet with the new believers so that they can study it further.

Virgin Islands

One teacher in **St. Thomas** visited a Bahá'í couple who had recently accepted the Faith with the aim of sharing with them the theme of the eternal Covenant. During the course of that initial visit, she also reviewed the short obligatory prayer, discussed general information about the Faith, encouraged participation in a study circle, and set up a series of home visits to follow. The friends in the Virgin Islands are finding that home visits are especially useful for consolidating those whose busy work schedules prevent them from participating in regular community events.

> During this consolidation period we have learned much in carrying out our activities. We have learned the importance of patience, flexibility, and readiness to search for new ways to meet the needs of our seekers and new Bahá'ís. Above all, we are learning to rely on prayer and the power of divine assistance to help us meet our challenges in sustaining action over time, in implementing the core activities, and in expanding our base of active teachers of the Faith.

Australia

The believers in the **Brisbane** cluster have also been using the pamphlets from Malaysia with the themes from Book 2 as the first step in consolidating new believers. Home visits are carefully coordinated by the cluster agencies working closely with the teaching teams. The second step after receiving home visits is for the new believer or seeker, whenever possible, to join a Book 1 study circle. The home visits do not necessarily stop once a new believer enters a study circle, however. Employing this approach, thus far, all of the new believers in the cluster have joined a study circle. The success of this systematic approach has increased the confidence of the members of the Area Teaching Committee and the institute coordinators in the potential for large-scale growth in the cluster. As one member of the cluster agencies commented:

> Although initially coordinating the progress of this large body of declarants and seekers through the sequence of institute courses seemed like a daunting task, we are confident of our ability to overcome this exciting challenge. Our confidence comes from knowing that we have a large pool of human resources that have been trained over the years to take up this challenge of consolidating these seekers and declarants. Suddenly, it all makes sense. Now we truly understand the reason for the institute process.

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